

To Find You Again by MuffinLove03

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Summary:

Finding her was only the beginning. In a town still vulnerable to inter-dimensional threats and sketchy government agents, it's going to take a lot to keep her safe and bring her home. But he was prepared to do whatever it took. He promised... (Mikeven, Jancy, Jopper)

1. Time After Time

Author's Note:

[A/N: Hey! So I'm new to AO3 but I know lots of people who use this site for fics! I just wrapped up this fic on ff.net and figured it'd be cool to share it with others who maybe only use AO3 :)]

This was basically my version of Season 2 so let me know what you think! It's gonna be a long but wild ride! Also, because the fic itself is pretty much finished, I plan to update relatively frequently. In the meantime, please leave some notes and let me know what you think! :) Thanks!]

Chapter 1:

The end of the year always seemed to pass by in the blink of an eye, what with so many holidays clustered together. As quickly as Christmas had come, it was gone, and now the small town of Hawkins was making its way toward New Years Eve.

The boys were certainly enjoying the winter break from school, spending most of their time at Mike's house playing Dungeons and Dragons, eating pizza, and otherwise simply hanging out. Everything was almost back to normal, as if Will had never disappeared into the Upside Down. As if the town of Hawkins had never been in a frenzy over the missing Byers boy. As if the events of the past month had never deviated from anything more than predictable suburban small town life and fictional monsters and quests - the key word being "almost".

This was no truer than for Mike who still couldn't bring himself to tear down the makeshift blanket fort he'd set up for Eleven in his basement. Neither Lucas, nor Dustin, nor Will had the heart to comment on it whenever they'd come over and find it still set up in the corner, Mike's super-com nestled between the pillows.

Things weren't quite the same with Will either, though he'd been

doing everything he could to hide the fact that at random times, he would briefly flicker in and out of the Upside Down. The first few times it had happened, he almost considered telling Jonathan. However, he couldn't put aside the thought of worrying either his brother or his mom. Joyce had gotten into the habit of randomly dropping whatever it was she was doing just to hug her young son, reaffirming over and over how much she loved him and how happy she was that he was home. She couldn't savor the moments enough. And that's exactly why Will didn't want to worry her. In the weeks since coming home from the hospital he'd vomited a few slugs which, while alarming, he rationalized as being a side effect of his time in the Upside Down that would eventually subside. The first time he'd flickered into the Upside Down since his home coming was more than a little shocking but over the past couple weeks, he'd grown somewhat used to it and could almost feel the episodes coming on, though he had no control over when or if they happened. He never stayed in the Upside Down for long and at times he wondered if he was only imagining it, like a bad memory that would creep up on him when he least expected it.

This time was different, though. This hadn't been a flicker.

For the majority of their break from school, the boys had set up camp in Mike's basement with long D&D campaigns running every day.

"You find yourself in a swamp," Mike said, setting the scene in a dramatic tone as the boys settled back into gameplay following the arrival of the pizza they'd ordered for dinner. "To the North, you see a house. To the West, you can go deeper into the thick, stinking swamp. The East and South are blocked off by dense growth. Lucas, what is your action?"

"I'm going North," Lucas said definitively. "But slow, and with my sword ready in case we run into something."

"How deep is the swamp?" Dustin asked as he guided melting cheese into his mouth from the pizza slice in his hand.

"I'm going North, too." Will said, nodding, as he moved his character piece.

“Thick, dirty swamp water comes up to your knees and the mud sucks at your feet with every step,” Mike went on, acting out the sounds he was describing. “You--”

“Mike!” Mike’s mother called down from the kitchen.

Mike deadpanned at the interruption before turning around and yelling, “What?!” When she didn’t respond, he rolled his eyes, grumbling. “Sorry guys. I’ll be right back.”

“Okay.” Will nodded pleasantly.

“I’m getting another piece before Dustin eats the whole pizza.” Lucas said, getting up from the table and walking over to the couch where the pizza box rested.

“Shut up, Lucas.” Dustin said over his shoulder, to which Lucas pushed Dustin’s arms, inciting one of their typical shoving matches.

“No, you shut up!”

“No, you!”

The two continued their play-shoving match as Will felt a familiar nausea settle into his stomach.

“Hey guys,” He said, standing up. “I’ll be right back.”

Dustin and Lucas barely responded as Will headed to the small half bathroom on the other side of the basement.

Upstairs, Mike stood opposite his mom at the kitchen island as she placed the remains of several cakes into colorful Tupperware containers. Much of the house was still decorated for Christmas and the tree in the living room had several opened gifts resting beneath it.

“What is it?” Mike asked, resting his hands on the island.

“Lucas’ mom called,” Mike’s mom said as she sealed the lid to a container of frosted spice cake. “It’s time for him to go home.”

“What?” Mike complained. “But we’re in the middle of a campaign!”

Karen stopped what she was doing to shoot him a stern look. “Tell Lucas his mom is waiting for him at home. He can pick back up with you guys tomorrow.”

“But you don’t understand,” Mike went on. “We can’t keep going without him. It throws off the whole--”

“*Michael*,” she said, turning to face him directly and Mike sighed.

“Okay, *fine*,” he conceded, trudging back downstairs where Lucas and Dustin were still bantering back and forth. “Hey, where’s Will?” he said, looking around and noticing the obvious absence of their fourth party member.

Dustin stopped wrestling against Lucas to look around, earning him one last sucker punch to the shoulder. “He was here a second ago.”

“Will?” Mike called, wandering around the basement. “Will!”

“You don’t think he --” Lucas trailed off as the trio’s search became a little more frantic. After all, he’d only just come home a month ago.

“Shit, shit, shit!” Dustin muttered to himself as he held his head in his hands, his fingers tugging at his curls in anxiety.

“No!” Mike snapped adamantly, pushing the thought of Will disappearing yet again out of his mind. “He’s gotta be arou --”

Without warning, Will appeared before them, crouched in front of El’s old fort.

“What the shit?!” Dustin exclaimed as all three boys did a double-take at their friend.

Will coughed several times before registering the three sets of eyes

locked on him.

“Dude, what was that?” Lucas demanded, his voice a little shaky with concern.

“Will, were you...?” Mike ventured to ask, not sure if he actually wanted his suspicion to be true.

“Yeah,” he said quietly, clearing his throat and leaning back against one of the table legs supporting the fort. “For a few minutes.”

Lucas shook his head. “How the hell did you get there?”

“More importantly, how did you get *back*?” Dustin added.

“I don’t know,” Will shrugged, pulling his knees up to his chest as his friends came closer, kneeling to the ground tentatively as though the slightest wrong move could send Will back into the Upside Down. “It’s happened a couple times before but only for a split second and I wasn’t sure if I was just imagining it or not.”

Will’s gaze was fixed on the floor in front of him as he did his best to calm down. He was back. He was okay. Somehow repeating those thoughts in his head wasn’t enough to comfort him, though.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Mike asked gently.

“I don’t know,” Will shook his head, his eyes wide as he gathered his bearings. One minute, he had been standing in front of the toilet in the basement bathroom and the next, he’s in the Upside Down. But it was different this time. Rather than a flicker between dimensions, he’d actually stayed in the Upside Down for a few minutes, long enough to wander out of the bathroom and back to the other side of the basement. “I think I saw --”

“What was it like?”

“Are you okay now?”

“What did you see?”

His friends bombarded him with questions at once, further disorienting Will as he turned his gaze to the empty fort beside him. Mike noticed his friend's gaze.

"What is it?" Mike asked excitedly, following Will's eyes to the blankets and pillows, the super-com beside them. "Did you see --"

"Come on, Mike," Lucas said pessimistically but in as gentle a tone as he could. "She's gone. We all saw her d--"

Dustin slapped Lucas on the arm, shooting him a look.

Mike just glared at Lucas, still desperate to hold onto his hope.

"No," Will began, Mike's heart sinking momentarily. "I-I think I did?"

"Really?" Mike's voice rose in pitch, his face immediately brightening. "Did she say anything? Is she okay? How did she get there?"

"I don't know," Will shook his head as his friends listened earnestly. "I thought I saw someone in here," He gestured to the fort. "But when I came over, that's when I came back."

"This is mental," Dustin said, shaking his head.

"Are you sure it was a person?" Lucas questioned. "What if there's another monster in there? Like the demogorgon?"

"I didn't see them very well," Will said. "But I think it was her."

"Are you sure?" Mike asked, his enthusiasm leaping ahead.

"Dude," Dustin said. "He just said he wasn't sure."

"Can you... are you able to go back?" Mike wondered. "You said this happened before?"

"Yeah," Will nodded. "But it happens randomly. I don't know why or

how to control it. I can just feel when it's about to happen."

Mike sighed, sitting back on his haunches.

"Like I said," Dustin nodded knowingly. "Mental."

Mike was caught up in thought at this point. If Will had in fact seen Eleven in the Upside Down then that would mean she hadn't died when she killed the monster. Maybe that meant they could find her and bring her back? But how? And even still, was she okay? Will had been in the Upside Down for only a week and barely made it out alive. It had been a month since Eleven disappeared...

"We've gotta find a way to get back to the Upside Down." Mike declared.

"Mike, seriously?" Lucas said. "How are we gonna do that?"

"Yeah," Dustin added ruefully. "Remember Chief Hopper said the gate closed when the monster died?"

"And besides," Lucas continued. "We're talking about Eleven here. If it was really her, why wouldn't she use this to talk to us right now?"

"Maybe her energy's zapped!" Mike rationalized. "I dunno!"

"Mike, you're losin' it, man," Lucas sighed, earning another smack and pointed look from Dustin.

"What are you talking about?" Mike raised an eyebrow.

"She's gone, man," Lucas gestured wildly, his arms wide as he looked around the room. "It sucks. It really sucks but it's the truth, Mike. And you haven't accepted it," He continued, despite Mike's glare. "I mean, you've got this fort set up like a shrine --"

"*Abort, Lucas. Abort!*" Dustin muttered.

"--and why are we not freaking out about the fact that Will is randomly slipping in and out of that place? Like, hello? He just

appeared out of nowhere!”

“But you’re okay,” Mike turned to his friend who, despite his circumstances, was sitting rather comfortably at this point. “Right, Will?”

“Yeah, I think so.” Will nodded.

“So what now?” Dustin asked, earning an incredulous look from Lucas.

Mike’s brow set with determination. “We’ve gotta find a way to find Eleven.”

2. Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This)

Notes for the Chapter:

[A/N: If you can't already tell, the chapter titles are inspired by songs. I put certain lyrics in my original posting of this fic on ff.net as a way to "set the mood" of the chapter but I'm undecided if I want to put them here. For now, I'll leave them off. Thanks for the comments/kudos thus far! :)]

Chapter 2

Later that night, Will was hesitant to go to sleep. What if he ended up in the Upside Down again and stayed even longer than last time? What if he couldn't get back? Before tonight, he'd never stayed for more than two seconds since his return home last month. What was happening?

He could still hear Jonathan in his room, walking around. His mom was in the living room watching TV and smoking a cigarette, still wearing her jacket from the General Store after a particularly long shift. While he didn't want to be alone, he knew that there were two possibilities if he left his room post-bedtime. Either he would be immediately sent back to bed or he would have to explain why he was having trouble sleeping and this whole crazy secret of his would be blown wide open. Not being quite ready for that yet, coupled with his terrible lying skills, meant that Will would have to just find a way to relax and fall asleep.

As the time passed and Will's eyelids grew weary, he drifted off into a restless sleep.

He was in the Upside Down again. He could tell by the layout that he was in the Wheeler's basement. Everything around him was dark and the cold air pricked at the skin of his exposed face and sent chills through the rest of his body. White specks of matter floated aimlessly through the air - he'd never quite figured out what those were. Adrenaline coursed through him as he stepped forward. He'd never actually seen the monster get killed so

there was still a small part of him that worried it would appear out of nowhere.

Will watched his steps closely, avoiding large vines that wrapped themselves around the basement stairs and across the floor. Behind him was the half bathroom and brown sludge dripped down the walls and over the toilet. The sink was wrapped in vines and in the darkness he could just barely make out the shapes of everything around him.

The air was still and quiet, such a stark contrast from the lively atmosphere that was Mike's house in the real world. The real version of this house was warm and inviting with people around all the time. The emptiness of the space before him, in contrast to what he knew it should be, was more than disconcerting.

Just a few feet away he could see the blanket fort. He'd never known Eleven, nor had he ever seen a picture of her, but his friends' descriptions of the girl and everything they'd done together were enough for him to piece her together in his mind.

Cautiously stepping forward, Will could make out what appeared to be the back of someone's head lying on the pillows in the blanket fort. Their head was shaved which immediately triggered him into thinking this must be Eleven. What were the chances?

Whoever it was never noticed him. They never turned around at least. Will could make out the form of their shoulder, a body resting on its side and curled into a fetal position. The outer blanket of the fort served as a curtain, preventing him from seeing the state of the person in front of him. Were they alive?

Mike's super-com sat nestled against the pillow beside this person's resting head, further supported by a thick vine that encircled the entirety of the fort. Brown sludge glistened as it slowly slid down the back of the super-com.

Curious but still cautious, Will trudged through the muck, getting closer and closer to the blanket fort. Who was this person and why were they here? If it was Eleven, he hoped for Mike's sake that she was alright. Now standing just outside the fort, shielded by the thin veil of one of the sheets,

Will crouched down. He stared intently at the back of this person's shaved head, ready to bolt at the first sign of a threatening movement. So far though, nothing. Not an adjustment in position or the faint rising and falling of shoulders with each breath. He reached forward, his hand trembling as he began to pull back the curtain so he could get a better look at this figure before him.

Suddenly, the figure was gone. The room was warm and he could smell the faint scent of pizza. The lights were bright and he winced at the adjustment. He wasn't in the Upside Down anymore and his friends surrounded him with questions he didn't know how to answer.

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After El had disappeared with the monster, Mike had had a difficult time adjusting. He cried more often than he liked to admit but did his best to hide that from his friends. She was gone. His head spun with the thought of how much had changed over the course of a week. One day he's playing D&D with friends and seven days later, he's had more terrifying, intense, and kind of awesome experiences than he ever could have imagined. He'd never felt the way he felt with El before and while that had been scary, it also felt kind of good. She was special and he liked her. He really liked her.

Sometimes he had nightmares about that night at the school. He could still see the monster, the petals of its head opening and a piercing screech rattling his ears. Claws outstretched as it came closer and closer. He wanted to take it down. He had to protect El. But they were losing and the monster was still coming.

He could still feel the loss of control of his own body as El pushed him back. He could feel his back slam into the counter behind him but he didn't even care about that. He was stuck in that spot - El wouldn't let him move. And as he watched her approach the monster, now pinned against the wall with her mind, the ache in his heart was overwhelming. He knew what she was doing but he begged and wished to be wrong. Thinking about it was enough to make him tear up and the sight of her face turning back to him, her eyes bloodshot and her sad but painfully brave expression haunted him. She'd whispered her goodbye to him and in remembering this moment, Mike wondered if he'd ever forget the sound of her voice. He didn't

even have a picture of her. She existed only in his memory.

A shred of him couldn't give up hope, though. That's why he'd put the blanket fort back together in the early morning hours following that night in the school. The bad men from the lab had torn the basement apart looking for traces of El and clues that would guide them to her location. Coming home after saying good-bye to her had been hard enough but to see the blanket fort torn down, pillows and sheet strewn about haphazardly was too much.

"Why did you do that, El?" he'd yelled angrily, his voice breaking. He'd thrown one of the pillows across the room before gathering another in his arms and sobbing into it for several minutes. "It's not fair!" he whispered, repeating it to himself over and over again. He couldn't get those images out of his head. He couldn't escape what haunted him.

As he settled, his brow fixed with determination. He rummaged through the torn-apart basement until he found his super-com.

"El, this is Mike!" he said, forcing an even tone from his voice but unable to keep his pitch from rising and falling. "Do you copy? Over."

Nothing but static.

"El! Are you there? Can you hear this? OVER!"

Still nothing. Pursing his lips and taking a shaky breath, he gathered up the pillows and returned them to what had once been El's makeshift fort. He left the super-com resting against the pillows, draped sheets and returned blankets to their original placement, arranging everything just as it had once been before El left. He'd sat in the fort late into the night, waiting on a call that never came.

He couldn't give up, though, and that's why the fort had stayed set up like that for this past month.

Now lying awake in his bed, with the light from the moon outside casting shadows over everything in his room, he had trouble settling

his mind down enough to fall asleep. He remembered showing El his trophies and his toys and how he'd had her hide in the closet so his mom wouldn't find her. Everything reminded him of her and it was hard to get his brain to shut off.

He finally fell asleep, his eyelids slowly drooping closed with his final gaze resting on the super-com on the nightstand by his bed. Just in case.

He didn't recognize the place he was in, not completely at least. Everything was dark and slimey. Vines of varying sizes wrapped themselves around everything they touched - doors, banisters, countertops. It looked like his house but it wasn't the same. As he crossed the kitchen and approached the basement stairs, he looked down into the dark cellar with intrigued trepidation. The minimal light that illuminated his path bounced off of white specks in the air. They almost looked like snowflakes frozen in space but that was the least of his concerns.

He didn't know where he was but he felt an inexplicable pull to go down into the basement. Blindly taking each step one at a time, he winced in disgust at the feeling of stepping on sludge. He could feel his feet crush something that felt and looked like a thick, long slug but he couldn't be sure.

His eyes immediately trained themselves on the blanket fort on the side of the basement, as they usually did when he was awake. His chest felt like a sinkhole had opened up within him as he caught sight of El's familiar figure. Her shaved head, the pink dress, the blue jacket that had once been his but had been selected for donation just a week before El appeared. It was her, it had to be her!

"El?!" Mike exclaimed excitedly, desperately, as he finished his descent of the steps, narrowly avoiding slipping on a slimey brown puddle at the base of the staircase.

"Mike," A small voice from the blanket fort sent his heart to fluttering as he closed the distance between himself and the fort.

El shifted from her spot and weakly looked up at Mike who was now crouched before her, soaking in her presence.

“El? El!” Mike couldn’t stop saying her name. There she was, every detail of her face being sketched into his memory once again. Despite being smudged with dirt and covered in splotches of slime, she was still pretty and he couldn’t stop staring. He gingerly moved a little closer, his hand coming up to touch her shoulder. He could feel her sigh at the contact. “El, I’m so glad I found you. How do I get you home? Are you okay? What do I do?”

The small girl didn’t respond but she met his gaze.

“Is this the Upside Down?” he asked, his tone serious as he tried to formulate a plan.

Eleven gave a small nod, her eyes half-lidded.

“Do you still have your powers? How do we get you back?”

“Tired,” She said simply, closing her eyes slowly, agonizingly, and causing Mike to hold his breath until she opened them again.

“So we need to get your strength back up,” Mike reasoned, remembering how drained she’d been even before she went head to head with the monster. “Okay, we can do that. Um...” He looked around, not entirely sure as to how that would actually happen. He tried not to become disheartened, at least not in front of her.

“Mike,” Eleven’s voice was small but just as he’d remembered it. She moved her hand closer to Mike’s hand that was currently resting on the blanket, supporting his weight. He watched as she placed it over his and he could feel his heart swell at the contact.

“We’ll get you out of here,” Mike said adamantly as he leaned down, embracing Eleven in a half-hug while holding her hand in his free one. “I promise.”

A clap of thunder from an overnight storm rolling into town startled Mike awake. As he looked around, regaining his bearings and realizing he was still in his room and tucked under the covers, his heart felt heavy once again. He’d been dreaming, but it felt so real.

Her voice, her face -- everything about it was like it had actually happened.

3. Always Something There To Remind Me

Notes for the Chapter:

[A/N: Thank you for the reviews and kudos, guys!
Ahh, Knivesmith, you're too sweet. :) Thank you!]

Chapter 3

An owl hooted in the distance, its call echoing over the lake in front of him as Hopper lounged against the wooden rail of his deck. An almost-full moon hung high in the sky, illuminating the surface of the lake and bouncing light off the rippling patterns in the water. The air was cold, the water even colder, but the lake wouldn't freeze for another few weeks if the years prior were any indication.

Clad in sweatpants and an open button-down flannel, Hopper took a long drag on his cigarette as he lost himself in his thoughts, his gaze fixed on the ripples in the lake where a fish was tickling the surface of the water.

He'd never gotten the best sleep since Sarah died. His dreams were always peppered with bittersweet memories that left him wishing to return to sleep whenever morning came. After bringing the Byers boy back from the Upside Down and, in doing so, sacrificing the telekinetic girl who'd helped them in their mission, his insomnia had only worsened. He hadn't seen it happen but he'd seen and heard the aftermath of what her disappearance had done to the boys - especially that Wheeler kid. In strange ways Hopper couldn't place, she'd reminded him of his daughter and he wasn't quite sure how to feel about that either.

Hopper watched as the smoke billowing out of his nose and mouth wafted through the night air, eventually disappearing in the moon's reflection.

As far as anyone knew, he'd moved on since the strange events surrounding Will Byers' disappearance and homecoming. That was the idea behind his new position, after all. Secrecy and covert

operations were familiar to him as he'd spent the better part of the last several years living in a world with windows and doors leading to his inner world kept firmly locked. Even the people who knew about what had happened to his daughter were still kept at arm's length.

He was working on contract with the government, his experience in the Upside Down having been seen as an asset to the Department of Energy. With Dr. Brenner unaccounted for and much of the former staff of the agency having been killed by the monster last month, Hopper had grudgingly agreed. He did, in fact, owe them the girl in exchange for he and Joyce's release and venture into the Upside Down to find Will. But what the agents at the lab didn't realize was that he wasn't skilled just at keeping their secrets. He harbored a few of his own, keeping what he knew close like a good hand in poker.

He remembered the night they brought Will out of the Upside Down and took him to the hospital. Vivid memories hung in his mind like cobwebs in an attic, trapping him with every step and distracting his view from everything else around him. Joyce's frantic, hopeful crying as she clutched her boy who'd finally started breathing again, the eyes of the older Byers boy and the Wheeler girl that would always be filled with images more traumatizing than any person should ever have to witness, the quiet whimpering cries of a trio of middle school boys, a missing girl.

Eggos.

Mike Wheeler had mentioned to his sister that their friend - he'd called her Eleven - had loved Eggos. The same girl he'd just exchanged in a deal with the Devil, he could now imagine sitting at someone's breakfast table, dressing a stack of Eggo waffles with more syrup than he could stand to look at. The thought turned his stomach with the nausea of guilt.

The first time he'd seen the videos had been what really haunted him. They were always shot from above, likely a corner in the ceiling of each room. He'd known that the lab had security cameras everywhere and monitored everything that happened in their facility but he hadn't been prepared to see Eleven's past in all its grainy,

heartbreaking detail.

It had been a late night at the lab. Most of the agents had already left for the evening, leaving a slimmer night crew on staff. Hopper had paid great attention to the subtle details around him during his escorted tours with the higher-ups and with his own access card he was able to move freely through the majority of the facility. He wondered how the agents could trust him with that level of security clearance but then he remembered that these agents didn't always behave ethically or play by the rules.

But that was okay because neither did he.

He hadn't been looking for anything in particular but the suppressed big city detective still lurking inside of him had a hunch, an inclination, a drive... he couldn't put a pin on it but he followed it. It had scarcely led him astray in the past. He'd found himself in the security tape room where about a dozen small screens showed grainy footage of several key areas around the facility. Everything was quiet from what he could see. There wasn't much hustle and bustle at 8 o'clock at night unless something serious was going on. For all intents and purposes, it looked like another quiet night.

Curiosity led him and he followed the scent like a bloodhound, scouting out the room. There were a few shelves with vaguely marked tapes lined up neatly and organized by number, then alphabetically. The walls of the room had several filing cabinets with key locks. After perusing the tapes on the shelves, he'd tried to open one of the cabinets, only to have it balk against him. He fingered through the tapes on the shelves once again, a single tape catching his eye. It was sticking out the slightest bit, as if someone had pulled it from the shelf recently and had failed to put it back with the same level of precision the other tapes had received.

011-67

He eyed the label on the side of the VHS case suspiciously, picking up the tape and looking for any other clues that could indicate more about the contents of this tape. He checked the TV screens to see if anyone was coming. One researcher was sitting at a desk, writing in a notepad somewhere on the other side of the building. A couple of other scientists were engaged in discussion in the lobby with one of the new agents the

facility had hired. Hopper stepped to the door and peered into the hallway.

Quiet.

Looking around the room for a camera, he found nothing. It would be ironic to have a camera in this room, wouldn't it? And even still, would the footage show up in this room or in another room he wasn't aware of? Showing little prudence, Hopper plucked the VHS tape from its case and stuck it into the player. He watched one darkened screen come to life and he immediately knew his hunch had been right.

From the camera's angle, he could see a small child with a shaved head sitting at a table in an otherwise barren room. She had a device on her head with wires sticking out in every direction, attaching electrodes to her forehead, temples, and the back of her head. There was a window in front of the girl where he could vaguely make out the shapes of adults but none were recognizable and the faces were obscured. A voice came over the intercom in the video.

"You're doing very well, Eleven," The voice said and he suspected it to be Dr. Brenner. "We're going to try something new today. Is that okay?"

The girl barely moved, her head tilted down and her profile flickering with the grainy film quality. Two agents dressed in white then entered the room, carrying a cage with a fluffy white cat. It meowed loudly as they stationed it in front of Eleven and the girl darted her gaze from the cat to the window. Even despite the camera distance and poor film quality, Hopper could see the way her facial expression turned to one of anguish and despair, though she never said a word.

The cat rubbed itself against the bars of its prison, meowing loudly at Eleven as she looked at it in horror, her face trembling.

"Eleven," Dr. Brenner's voice said over the intercom. "Remember what we talked about this morning. With your powers, I want you to kill this cat."

The way he spoke the words so coldly, as if it were a completely normal thing to request of a little girl sent a chill down Hopper's spine. He watched as Eleven stared at the cat, her eyes brimming with tears as the

once friendly, plaintive cat began to take a defensive stance. He watched as it hissed at her intense gaze and he felt a force inside of him begging to turn the video off. But he was a cop, first and foremost, and he'd developed the ability long ago to resist that force. He faced the horrific head-on and while it made him a good cop, it also hardened him quite a bit over the years.

Movement on one of the other screens had caught his eye and he saw that one of the agents, a superior of his, was heading down this particular hallway. He quickly ejected the tape and stuffed it back into its case, hiding it in one of the pockets inside his winter coat. When his superior had passed by the room, Hopper hiding against the wall and concealed by shadows, he'd decided to call it a night and head out. The next time he came to the lab, he'd picked the locks of the filing cabinets, those detective instincts at work once again. That was how he'd ended up with videos 1-77 of Eleven. It'd taken him a couple of weeks to get through each one and they'd varied in length, some lasting as long as 10 hours per tape. In the end, he'd never be able to erase the knowledge of what that little girl had been through. Guilt gnawed at him, reminding him that her fate had been his fault. He'd been quite despondent over it until he'd overheard some of the researchers discussing plans to find "the girl". Talk of hazmat suits and questionable lifeforms clued him in that they were talking about the Upside Down. At that point, he'd yet to be sent into the dark and dismal dimension but he knew that was ultimately their plan for him. After all, he and Joyce had been the only ones thus far to venture into that world and return unscathed.

So Eleven was alive somewhere in the Upside Down and the researchers wanted to find her. For what purpose, he couldn't be sure but based on the content of the videos he'd found, it wouldn't be good.

He couldn't let that happen. He couldn't just sit idle, leaving that girl to such a fate. He'd made a choice once before that, despite the overwhelmingly positive nature of the outcome, had still left him with considerable guilt. This could be his chance at redemption, at atonement. He needed to find her first.

Hopper took a final drag on his cigarette and flicked it into the lake, exhaling slowly. His decision to find Eleven had been weeks ago.

He'd already explored the Upside Down twice at this point with little trace of her to be found. Maybe the researchers had been wrong and maybe she actually had died that day at the school. Still, he couldn't give up yet.

After stuffing his feet into his boots and slipping into a big winter coat, Hopper headed out on a familiar route. His breath came in clouds in his truck until the heat finally kicked in but by that time, he was already almost to his destination. He pulled over along the side of the road, his front bumper scraping against a mound of old snow that had been shoved to the edges of the street by a snowplow. Most of the snow from last week had melted at this point, leaving only icy mounds leftover from shoveling and plowing, but the weather forecast was calling for more in a couple days.

Hopper trudged across the icy snow barrier and into the woods, following a familiar path that had once been clearly marked by his tracks in the snow.

He knelt beside a dropbox, pulling out a pair of Eggos wrapped in cellophane that he'd prepared earlier that evening. Opening the lid to the box, he found the food he'd left there the day before was gone. He liked to think that it was because Eleven had found the food in the Upside Down and taken it but there was no way to be sure. For all he knew, he could be feeding the animals in the woods or a homeless person -- but he returned every day to find an empty dropbox again and again and in his mind, it was Eleven. That was the only way he got any sleep at night.

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The boys were planning to meet up at Mike's house the following day to begin their search for Eleven. Mike had talked to Lucas and Will earlier that morning to confirm the time the boys were supposed to show up. Since Dustin didn't live close enough to use the super-com, Mike called his house.

"Hey Dustin," Mike greeted when Dustin picked up the phone. "Can you be here at 10:30?"

"Yeah, sure." Dustin agreed, a tinge of sleepiness still left in his voice though he'd been up for a little while now.

"Okay, good." Mike nodded.

"I'm gonna stop at McDonald's on my way," Dustin said. "I already asked Will and Lucas but do you want anything?"

"I want El back." Mike said stubbornly, remembering his dream and how real it had felt. She had to be out there.

"Yeaaaaah," Dustin quipped. "I've got ten dollars."

Mike let out an exasperated sigh. "See you soon." he said, hanging up.

By the time his friends had arrived and were mostly finished eating, Mike was more than a little agitated. He paced back and forth in his basement as Will, Lucas, and Dustin finished their breakfast.

"Mike, do you want some of my hash brown?" Will offered.

"No, I'm not hungry," Mike said brusquely, then added, "But thanks."

"Alright," Lucas said, rolling up the wrapper from his breakfast sandwich. "So what were you saying about some dream you had?"

Mike stopped pacing. "It was really weird," he began, then gestured to the blanket fort a few feet away. "She was right there and she was talking to me and everything was really dark and gross."

"Like the Upside Down." Will breathed thoughtfully.

"I guess?" Mike shrugged. "I dunno, but she said she was tired and I promised her we'd find her."

"But this was a dream." Lucas said bluntly, one eyebrow raised.

"No -- Yes... I think so?" Mike groaned in frustration. "I'm telling you; it wasn't like a regular dream."

Lucas shook his head in disbelief.

“Come on, you guys!” Mike exclaimed. “What if she’s really been out there all this time? She saved us, don’t you remember?!”

“Of course we remember,” Dustin chimed in. “But it’s kind of a wild goose chase. Will doesn’t know how to get to the Upside Down voluntarily and even if he gets there, then what?”

“And the portal’s closed,” Lucas added. “Chief Hopper told us that like, a week after the fact.”

“Exactly,” Dustin agreed. “Dude, we all miss Eleven but we need an actual plan and from what I can see, it looks like we’re S.O.L. at this point.”

“But we can’t just sit here!” Mike said, his frustration growing.

“Actually,” Will’s small voice piped up amidst the louder arguing of his friends. “I think we do have something to go on.”

“Really?” Mike turned to his friend, his eyes brightening with hope and his voice rising in pitch.

“Really?” Lucas parroted in a more pessimistic tone.

“Yeah,” Will said, leaning one arm against the back of his chair, his friends’ eyes focused intently on him. “On my way here this morning, it happened again. I was crossing through the woods near Mirkwood and all of a sudden I was in the Upside Down again.”

“Did you see Eleven?” Mike asked quickly.

“No,” Will said and Mike deflated slightly. “But I found this weird box out in the woods. I was in the Upside Down so it was really dark and slimey everywhere but when I opened the box, there was food in it,”

“Food?” Dustin repeated, one eyebrow quirked.

“Yeah,” Will nodded. “It was wrapped in plastic wrap but it was still weird that it wasn’t like, moldy and gross, you know?”

“What’s your point, Will?” Lucas asked impatiently.

“Well, when I switched back out of the Upside Down, it was still there,” Will shrugged. “I don’t know, I thought it was weird.”

“That makes sense though,” Dustin said. “The Upside Down is like this parallel double of our dimension so solid objects like tables and chairs and boxes would be the same across both dimensions.”

“Except not life-forms,” Lucas added, nodding. “It’s weird that someone’s leaving food in the woods but I’m not surprised it was in the Upside Down version, too.”

“Wait a minute,” Mike finally spoke after having been quiet for several minutes, deep in thought. “Will, what kind of food was it?”

“Oh yeah!” Will suddenly exclaimed, catching the other boys off-guard. “That was the weird part. You said Eleven liked Eggos, right?”

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The sky was grey and overcast as the boys raced to Mirkwood on their bikes.

“You’re sure it was Eggos?” Dustin asked, panting slightly as he peddled.

“Pretty sure.” Will nodded, focused on the path ahead as Mike led the group to the fateful road. The sun had begun to melt several patches of snow but Mirkwood was one of the last streets to get plowed and as a result, had mounds of icy snow lining the edges, grey with grime from car exhausts. With the constant melting and refreezing of snow, ice patches were scattered around here and there.

“What do we do when we get there?” Lucas asked as the group turned onto Mirkwood.

“We look for El,” Mike replied over his shoulder, turning back slightly. “Maybe she’s not in the Upside Down at all. What if she got out and is somewhere in the woods or something?”

“But what about your dream?” Will asked.

“I... don’t know,” Mike said. “But we’ll figure it out.”

“What if she’s like, sending you messages in your mind or something?” Dustin suggested. “That’s something she’d do right?”

“Can she even do that?” Lucas asked.

“I dunno, maybe?” Mike said, casting another look behind him as his friends followed his lead.

He didn’t turn around in time to see the crushed patch of ice and snow in front of him or to avoid his front tire going through it and losing traction. As his bike flipped, Will, Lucas, and Dustin quickly dodged the patch and stopped their bikes, watching as Mike was catapulted off his bike.

“Mike!”

“Augghhh!” Mike yelled before colliding with the pavement and immediately losing consciousness.

4. Never Surrender

Notes for the Chapter:

[A/N: Thank you everyone for reading, commenting, and leaving kudos! Celestial55, I'm so glad you're enjoying! Comments like yours make my day so thank you :)]

Mike's eyes slowly fluttered open as he regained his bearings. The first thing he noticed was the wet, slimy feeling beneath him. He moved his hands and he could feel thick goo sliding between his fingers. As his eyes focused on the brown sludge he found himself in, he startled, breathing heavily as he began to recognize the place. He'd been here once before.

His bike lay in a heap next to him, covered in vines that weaved their way between the handlebars and through the bike chain.

"Mike," A voice next to him and he nearly jumped out of his skin before turning toward the soft sound in his ear.

Eleven was kneeling beside him and he suddenly forgot all about the disgusting gunk on his hands and back and the creepy white particles floating in the air around him.

"Eleven!" he exclaimed, his face visibly lifting at the sight of her. Her clothes were dirty and Nancy's old dress was barely recognizable but aside from some wear and tear, she looked almost as she had the last time he'd seen her. There was some bruising on her face and arms as well as what appeared to be smears of dirt. Her short hair, barely an inch longer than it had been when they'd first met, was slicked down against her head from the cold, moist air. Despite all of this, his heart still fluttered at the sight of her.

"Wh-what's going on?" Mike asked, looking around as he slowly stood up, making vain attempts at straightening up his appearance as brown sludge sluiced off his shoulders. "Am I in the Upside Down?"

Eleven merely shook her head. "I am." she spoke softly.

"Okay..." Mike said, processing. "Where are Lucas and Dustin and Will?"

"Home."

Mike took a moment to think before speaking again. "I fell off my bike," he began, reciting what he remembered. "We were on our way to Mirkwood and I fell off my bike... and I hit my head," he paused. "Am I... Am I dead?"

Eleven's eyes widened and she quickly shook her head quite emphatically.

Mike furrowed his brow. "Okay... Am I unconscious?"

Eleven nodded.

"So you're... talking to me because I'm unconscious?" he gathered.

Eleven made a face, indicating he was partially right. "Too weak," she said, pointing to herself.

Mike frowned. "So your powers..." he reasoned. "You can't do as much, can you? Like open a portal?"

Eleven shook her head sadly, her doe eyes looking up at him wistfully.

"Crap," he muttered, biting his lip as he thought.

Some indistinct chatter from farther out in the woods caught El's attention and her body stiffened at the sound. Mike could see a familiar fear in her eyes.

"What is it?" Mike asked, immediately stepping in front of her and peering into the dim, foggy woods. "Is it the monster? Is it back?"

El shook her head vigorously, her lip trembling. "Bad men."

"What?" Mike said incredulously. "No, El, they're dead, remember?"

She quirked an eyebrow at him, confused, but more chatter from the

woods distracted her and she was becoming more visibly agitated.

“N-not safe,” she murmured repeatedly, slowly beginning to back away from where they stood. “Not safe...”

“Wait, El, don’t go,” Mike said, grabbing her hand instinctively. “How...How did they even get here?”

“The lab,” she said softly, her voice barely a whisper as her eyes never left the woods.

Mike could hear radios in the distance. Try as he did to see into the forest, it was to no avail. He could barely see several feet in front of him.

“El, how do you know --” he began, but when he turned around, she was gone.

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Video 011-12

A young child sat nervously on a cold metal chair, her hospital gown doing little to protect her from its harsh chill. Thin legs dangled from the chair and she looked around nervously, wondering what was going to happen. Long brown hair swished back and forth every time she darted her gaze around the room. She couldn’t have been more than four years old, the chair all but swallowing her up with its size. There was an empty table in front of her, also cold and metal, and a machine twice her size stationed next to her. She looked at it apprehensively, then refused to look at it again. As she fidgeted with her hospital gown, the mirror on the wall opposite her revealed itself to be a window with several figures standing behind the glass.

A tall man with white hair entered the room and the girl looked up at him, shrinking in her chair the slightest bit.

“Hello, Eleven,” he greeted her warmly but his fatherly tone did nothing to assuage her visible tension. “Today’s your big day. Aren’t you excited?”

She stared blankly at the man who was undeterred by her lack of

response. He took a seat next to the small girl and motioned to the two-way mirror for someone to enter. Two other men dressed in white entered the room, one carrying a small box.

“Do you know what this is?” The tall, white-haired man gestured to the monstrous machine next to her. The little girl shook her head. “This is an electroencephalograph,” he said simply, as if a girl her age could understand such a large word. “We use this to measure what people can do with their brains.” He tapped the girl on the forehead and she winced at the contact but otherwise did not move. “I think we can learn a lot from you, Eleven,” he said, standing up. “You’ll help us, won’t you?”

Eyes wide, she turned her gaze from the white-haired man, to each of the men standing in wait against the wall, then back to the first man.

Despite her timidity, she was somehow able to speak. She nodded, “Yes, Papa.”

“Very good,” he said, patting her head and running a hand through her hair. He looked to the guards and nodded in the girl’s direction. The guard holding the box stepped forward, pulling a pair of clippers out of the box and plugging them into the outlet across the table. The other guard approached, ready to assist. The girl warily followed the guards’ movements, scooting closer to the white-haired man. “Now Eleven,” Papa continued, unfazed by her obvious apprehension. “In order for you to help us, we’ll be using this machine.” He reached underneath the EEG, retrieving a device shaped like a helmet but made of metal and wire electrodes. The girl turned to him and balked at the device in his hands, her eyes wide and frightened.

One of the guards took hold of her shoulders, causing her to jump, as the other guard switched on the clippers. A loud buzzing sound filled the room and overpowered much of the audio. The little girl began to cry as she squirmed against the chair.

“No, Papa!” she cried, swatting at the guard with the clippers. “No!”

“Eleven,” The white-haired man said more sternly and the young girl immediately stopped moving as though paralyzed. “Be still.”

Her shoulders shook with her crying as the guard touched the clippers to her scalp. A long chunk of hair fell to the floor and the girl began to sob louder.

“Nooooo!” she whimpered as the clippers came at her again and again. “No!” Her fear of the clippers and what was happening outweighing the white-haired man’s intimidation. She began to thrash about violently in the chair, almost toppling it over. Another guard rushed in and grabbed hold of one of her arms as the guard previously holding her down secured her other arm. Pinning her against the metal chair, her movements were restricted though she tried to break free, crying all the while. The guard with the clippers continued to shave her hair in large patches and a pile of dark brown hair encircled the chair. The girl was quiet for a moment and then in a sudden burst of energy, began to thrash about once again, knocking the two guards holding her off balance.

“Take her to the room.” The white-haired man said evenly and the girl suddenly turned to him, her eyes flooded with tears.

“No, Papa!” she cried as the guards lifted her out of her chair, her legs thrashing about and kicking them in the sides. She was so small, one guard wrapped a hand around both of her ankles as they maneuvered her such that one was carrying her legs and the other guard held her arms together.

“Papa!” she screamed as they carried her out of the room, her head half-shaved and the hair that remained disheveled as the white-haired man watched.

The video promptly cut to the young girl sitting in the metal chair again, her head fully shaved at this point. Her shoulders trembled but she was otherwise silent. The white-haired man stood behind her and only one guard remained at the side of the room. A book sat on the table in front of her and the girl was staring at it, her face void of emotion. The white-haired man lifted the wired device onto her head and the guard walked over to assist with applying the electrodes to her scalp.

“Now Eleven,” The white-haired man said once the electrodes were in place. “Your first task is simple. I want you to open this book.”

The girl started to reach for the book but the white-haired man stopped her hand with his. "No, no," he said, putting her hand back in her lap. "Not with your hands." He shook his head then tapped her on the forehead. "With your mind."

She stared at him, never saying a word.

"I know you can do it," he said encouragingly. "Do you think you can try this for me? For your Papa?"

She inhaled deeply, her gaze fixed on him, before slowly nodding and turning back to the book. She stared at it for several seconds, her brow furrowed deeply as she concentrated. The white-haired man and the guard stood back, watching. Behind the two-way mirror, a few other indistinct figures watched as well. After a few moments, she sat back in the chair.

"Don't stop, Eleven," The white-haired man commanded. "You need to do this. Open the book."

She turned her gaze back to the book, leaning forward as she put everything she had into focusing on that book. Again, nothing.

"Eleven," The white-haired man scolded as he reviewed the readings coming from the EEG. "You're not trying hard enough. Open the book!"

Her shoulders began to shake once again as she started to whimper but as the guard began to approach, she quickly quieted and threw her focus back into the book. Finally, the cover of the book began to tremble, eventually flipping open on the table.

"Incredible," The white-haired man breathed.

A drop of blood slid down from the young girl's nose and she reached up to catch the trickle. Looking at her hand, her face visibly faltered and tears welled in her eyes as she began to cry hysterically.

The white-haired man crouched down to the girl, pulling a handkerchief from his pocket and wiping the small drop of blood from her face. She jumped slightly at the contact.

“See?” he said, the girl watching his actions intently. “I knew you could do it. We’ll practice more later.”

“Take her back to her room,” The white-haired man ordered the guard. “That’s enough for this afternoon.”

The guard who had shaved her head picked her up from the chair, carrying her like a sack of potatoes out of the room.

“Papa!” she cried, reaching out for the white-haired man before being whisked out of the room as the man she called Papa stayed behind.

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“Mike!”

“Mike?”

“Mike!”

“Dude, wake up!”

“Should we call 9-1-1?”

“No, look! He’s waking up!”

As he opened his eyes, Mike could feel a raging headache emanating from a growing bump on the back of his head. Everything seemed so bright as he sat up, clutching his head and wincing.

“Mike, are you okay?” Will asked. All three of his friends were crouched down around him, their bikes surrounding them as they hovered on the side of the street.

Dustin waved a hand in front of Mike’s face. “Say something, man.”

“I-I saw El,” Mike breathed as he regained his senses. He was back in Mirkwood. The real Mirkwood. The sun was out, the trees in the woods next to them dripped with melting snow, and they were surrounded by mounds of icy, dirty snow. Mike felt his back. It was wet with melted snow and ice but there was no brown sludge to be

found. "She was right here."

"Yeah, she was." Will said softly.

"Huh?" Mike did a double-take. "You saw her, too?"

"You were out for a few minutes, Mike." Dustin said, concern still lingering in his tone.

"Will disappeared again," Lucas explained. "While you were knocked out."

"You did?" Mike turned to Will. "What happened?"

"As soon as you wiped out, I went back into the Upside Down again," Will began.

"Yeah," Dustin added. "He disappeared right off his bike and it crashed over there!" He pointed to the other side of the street where Will's bike lay.

"I didn't come back right away so I started walking into the woods," Will continued. "She was over at that dropbox. I saw her pull the food out of it and she saw me, too."

"Did she say anything to you?" Mike asked.

Will shook his head. "She looked scared though. We heard something deeper in the woods and before I knew it, she ran away."

Mike furrowed his brow, pulling his knees to his chest and crossing his arms over them as he listened. "I talked to her again... I think."

"You *think*?" Lucas inquired, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah," Mike said. "I mean, it sounds crazy but I'm pretty sure you were right, Dustin."

"Really?" Dustin brightened.

“*Really?*” Lucas repeated, a little less convinced.

“Yeah,” Mike nodded. “She’s really tired and her powers are weakened.”

“I can’t believe she’s still okay since she’s been in the Upside Down so long.” Will thought aloud.

“Maybe she’s immune to it.” Dustin guessed and Lucas swatted him on the arm.

“What sense does *that* make?”

“Uh, a *lot?*” Dustin snarked. “What other explanation would you have for her to still be alive in there?”

“Guys,” Mike interrupted. “We can figure that out later. The point is that she’s still alive and she’s in trouble.”

“Again?” Lucas asked.

“Is there another monster?” Dustin wondered, nudging Will who shook his head.

“I only saw one when I was there.”

“She said there’s bad men after her again.” Mike clarified.

“But they all died at the school.” Dustin replied.

“Well, maybe they didn’t,” Mike shrugged. “Or maybe there’s more. I dunno, but we’ve gotta get her out of there.”

“But how are we supposed to do that?” Lucas interjected. “Maybe you guys forgot but *there’s no portal*, remember?”

“Yes there is,” Mike countered. “El said the portal in the lab is still open.”

Dustin raised an eyebrow. “But the Chief said--”

“Forget the Chief!” Mike interrupted.

“Forget the -- *Mike*, have you forgotten who *saved* our asses?” Lucas confronted. “*And* saved Will?”

Mike shook his head, backtracking. “Just -- ugh, what if the Chief is wrong?”

“Then why would he tell us the portal closed, hmm?” Lucas countered.

Dustin’s eyes widened. “Lando,”

“Dude, *shut up* about Lando!” Lucas smacked Dustin on the arm, sighing in exasperation. “The Chief is on our side!”

“Is there something we can do to find out if the portal actually is open?” Will finally spoke up.

Mike paused, then exclaimed, “The compasses!”

5. Shake It Out

“Compasses?” Will parroted, looking around to his friends for an explanation.

“Yeah,” Lucas nodded as Dustin slipped out of his backpack and began to rummage through it. “If the portal is still open, it would disrupt the electromagnetic fields.”

“Oh, okay!” Will brightened. “So instead of pointing to true North, the needle would point toward the portal?”

“Exactly,” Dustin said, tossing aside a box of candy he’d dug out of his backpack as he scoured the bag’s contents.

“Guys,” Mike said, peering past his friends and up the road.

“Are you sure it’s in there?” Lucas asked impatiently, apparently not hearing Mike.

“I swear I left it in here,” Dustin mumbled to himself, his hand feeling around the bottom of the backpack.

“Guys!” Mike said louder, more demanding.

“Eureka!” Dustin exclaimed, finally retrieving the compass and holding it up victoriously.

“What, Mike?” Lucas asked but as he followed his friend’s gaze, he didn’t need an answer.

A vehicle was making its way down the road toward them, slowing down as it got closer. All four boys froze. Ever since they were chased down by government agents, they always felt a twinge of fear run through them at unfamiliar approaching cars. The fact that they were only a few yards away from the fence that bordered Hawkins Lab did nothing to assuage their anxiety.

“Act casual!” Dustin whispered hoarsely as he stuffed his hands in his

pockets, the compass tucked safely in his fist, and started to stroll away from the road lackadaisically.

“That’s casual?!” Lucas exclaimed, his hands gesturing wildly to Dustin’s awkwardly bouncing gait. *“You look like an idiot!”*

“Shut up, Lucas!” Dustin shot back through gritted teeth.

Mike groaned, turning away from the car and trying to quickly come up with a plan if they needed to run. He tried to remind himself that there was probably nothing to worry about. Nothing out of the ordinary had happened in over a month. Still, he couldn’t help the slight adrenaline rush and it didn’t hurt to be prepared to bolt if some government agents decided to finish what they started.

As the car slowed to a stop next to the boys’ bikes, Dustin looked up at the barren tree limbs above them.

“Shit, shit, shit…” he muttered to himself.

“What do we do?” Lucas asked as the boys shuffled further away from the road.

“Guys, it’s just Hopper.” Will said, relieving the tension as his friends turned around to see the familiar SUV of the Hawkins Police Chief.

“What are you kids doin’ out here?” Hopper asked as he stepped out of the car, one arm leaning against the roof of his vehicle.

“Nothing.” Mike replied quickly.

“Taking a walk!” Lucas blurted out.

“Love that cardio.” Dustin added, nodding affirmatively as he moved his arms back and forth as though he were power-walking.

Hopper raised an eyebrow at the boys. *“Right,”* he said, unconvinced but seemingly moving away from the subject. *“Well, the weather is calling for a hell of a storm so I suggest you all get home before it rolls in.”*

“We’ll definitely get on that.” Mike nodded, still not entirely comfortable with the Police Chief stumbling upon them only a few yards away from Hawkins Lab property. Maybe it was all in his mind but he felt like he was wearing a sign that said ‘Currently searching for portal to find missing telekinetic girl potentially lost in alternate dimension’.

“Thanks for the heads up!” Will offered respectfully.

Hopper eyed them a moment longer before slipping back into his vehicle and continuing to drive down the icy road.

Dustin waited until Hopper’s 4x4 was out of sight to speak. “Okay, that is such bull.”

“What?” Mike asked.

“The *storm*?” Dustin said. “My mom was watching the news when I left this morning. It isn’t supposed to snow until late tonight,”

“So?” Lucas replied sarcastically. “What’s your point?”

Dustin groaned, rolling his eyes. “Do I have to spell it out? Was that seriously *not* suspicious to you?”

“Um, *no*?” Lucas countered.

Before Dustin could respond, Will retched, drawing all three boys’ attention to their friend who was currently lurching forward.

“Will, are you okay?” Mike asked, stepping forward but immediately jumping back as a long, slimey slug-like creature was projected from Will’s mouth and landed on the cold ground in front of them.

“What the hell is *that*?!” Lucas exclaimed as the slug slithered away and disappeared into the forest brush.

“Dude, that’s so gross.” Dustin shook his head, staring in the direction the slug had gone.

Will coughed, wiping his mouth, and Mike walked over, patting his friend on the back. "You alright, Will?" Mike's tone was concerned. None of them had ever seen Will vomit a slug, though they were aware it had been happening. The reality of it was more unnerving than expected.

Will nodded weakly. "Yeah," His voice was raspy and he coughed again.

"Maybe we should take him home." Dustin suggested.

"I'm fine, guys," Will shook his head before retching again but this time he forced the nausea away as his friends watched warily. "Really."

"You don't seem fine." Lucas said pointedly, gesturing to his friend who still looked a bit green in the face.

"C'mon," Mike said, guiding his friend back to the road where their bikes lay. "We can come back later. It's totally cool."

"Are you sure?" Will asked, disappointed that he was throwing a wrench in their plan to find El but also feeling more nauseated than he usually did. "I don't-"

"We're sure," Mike cut him off. "Right guys?"

Lucas and Dustin nodded, following closely behind.

"Yeah."

"Definitely."

"Do you wanna just go home?" Mike asked. "Since we're right near your house anyway?"

Will shook his head, pursing his lips to keep the motion from making him sick. "No, my mom is home. I don't... I'd rather not have to explain this to her - not yet."

“Okay...” Mike said hesitantly. “Let’s head back to my house then.”

The three boys waited a few minutes for Will to regain enough composure that he could ride his bike on his own before making their way back to the Wheeler house.

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Mike had all but forgotten that tonight was New Year’s Eve but the silver and gold decorations throughout the house and the smell of various finger foods and desserts cooking and baking in the kitchen was a quick reminder. Silver garland was wrapped in spirals around the banisters and the house looked a bit neater, a bit straighter, than it had when he’d left that morning. Plastic banners that read “1984” in gigantic letters hung in the dining and living rooms and on the dining table were several sets of silly hats, noise-makers, and kazoos.

As the boys entered the house, Mike’s mom called out from the kitchen, “Mike, is that you?”

“Yeah, Mom!” he yelled back, then whispered to his friends, “We gotta get Will downstairs without my mom noticing he doesn’t feel well or she’s gonna call his mom.”

The boys nodded affirmatively and followed Mike through the house and into the kitchen. They were almost to the basement door when Mike’s mom turned around from the counter, baby Holly on her hip.

“Hey Mike,” she said, stopping Mike in his tracks. Dustin and Lucas stealthily escorted Will downstairs without drawing much attention from Mike’s mom. “Don’t forget we have people coming over this evening for the New Year’s Eve party.”

“Oh, um, yeah,” he nodded. “I didn’t forget.” He’d totally forgotten.

“Okay, good,” she said, glancing at the basement door. “Are your friends staying as well?”

“Uh, yeah,” Mike darted a glance at the basement, then turned back

to his mom and nodded vigorously. "We're probably just gonna pick our campaign back up."

"Okay, that's fine," Mike's mom replied. "But make sure you straighten up the basement. I went down there while you were gone and you boys left it a mess."

Mike huffed, annoyed. "Okay."

Mike's mom raised an eyebrow at the mildly disrespectful tone and Mike immediately noticed her expression. "Okay," he said more calmly.

Seemingly satisfied with that, Mike's mom set Holly down and turned back to the counter. "Okay, have fun," she said, adding over her shoulder, "And sometime tonight you need to put your laundry away. It's been sitting in the basket downstairs for two days."

"Right," Mike nodded, making his way to the basement door. "Okay," he said, slipping downstairs before his mom could keep him any longer.

Will was lying on the couch by the basement with an old plastic bucket set in front of him.

"How's he doing?" Mike asked once he was at the bottom of the steps.

"I'm okay," Will gave a small smile. "I don't think I'm gonna throw up again but I still feel a little sick."

"Okay," Mike said, trying to formulate a new plan in his mind.

"So what now?" Lucas asked, taking a seat at their D&D table. "We didn't get to check and see if the compass worked."

"Wait a minute," Dustin said, digging into his jacket pocket and retrieving the compass. "We still can. Maybe we can't follow it at the moment but we can see if it--" He cut himself off as he watched the needle. "It's still off!"

“Really?!” Mike exclaimed, darting over to Dustin to look over his shoulder at the compass.

“Let me see that,” Lucas said, jumping up from his seat and grabbing the compass. “Holy shit, you’re right.”

“That’s not true North!” Dustin commented.

Lucas returned the compass to Dustin. “So that means --”

-- the portal is still open!” Mike finished, his excitement billowing up inside of him.

“So now we just have to see if the compass leads us back to Hawkins Lab or if it takes us somewhere else.” Dustin reasoned.

“El said the portal was in the lab.” Mike said confidently.

“Why would the Chief lie to us though?” Lucas wondered, striking a difficult balance between suspicion and loyalty to the man who rescued them.

“Maybe he doesn’t know it’s still open?” Mike guessed, shrugging.

“Or maybe --” Dustin began.

Lucas cut him off, “Don’t even say it,”

Dustin glared at his friend before muttering, “Lando.”

“I *knew* you were gonna say that!” Lucas threw his hands up in the air.

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Will had drifted off to sleep despite his friends’ loud voices and debating. He’d never felt nauseous for this long after puking up one of those slug things. With his ventures into the Upside Down gradually lasting longer and his nausea lasting longer than usual, he

started to wonder if maybe he should tell his mom about what was going on. He couldn't deny that the whole situation was freaking him out, though the first time it had happened had been the most terrifying.

It was a week after he'd gotten home from the hospital and for the first time since his return, he was left home alone for a few hours. Joyce had insisted on staying home with him for the week following his release from the hospital and everything had seemed to be improving so she had reluctantly gone back to work, repeating to Will over and over that he should call the store if he needed anything. Will was getting his strength back and his cough had all but subsided. He had never been the most athletic kid but even riding his bike for a few minutes left him feeling winded so in the immediate aftermath of his return, his friends typically stopped by his house to see him. The school had closed down for a few weeks to clean up and make repairs to the building so the boys were able to hang out together almost every day and during that time, they'd even moved their D&D game to the Byers house so that Will wouldn't be left out and they could continue their campaigns.

Will had decided to make himself a sandwich for lunch. He padded into the kitchen, careful to not move too fast or turn his head too sharply lest he become light-headed. The peanut butter was in one of the top cabinets and with Will's short stature, he couldn't quite reach so he dragged one of the kitchen chairs over to the counter and slowly climbed up. The peanut butter jar was hiding behind a box of Rice Krispies and as he reached for it, he felt a strange tingling sensation spread throughout his body, resonating in his head. Suddenly he was cold and nauseous and before he could make sense of what was happening, everything around him changed. Vines wrapped themselves around the cabinets, white particles floated through the air, his breath came out in a foggy mist, and dark brown slime covered the cereal box in front of him.

He'd screamed, losing his balance and falling from the chair, hitting the linoleum with a thud. Before even hitting the floor, however, he was back in his house. His *real* house. No vines, no particles, no slime. It had happened in a matter of seconds and Will wondered if it had even happened at all. Maybe he had imagined it. He'd spent

almost every night since returning from the Upside Down in restless nightmares that left him incapable of sleeping with the lights off. It had to be in his imagination. He was back, he was home, and according to his friends, the monster was gone. There was nothing to worry about anymore.

As Will regained his bearings, the dull ache of a bruise forming on his hip, he lifted himself into a sitting position. His head swam and a rumbling sensation fluttered through his stomach. Before he could make a move for the kitchen trash can, he retched and acid filled his mouth, followed by a solid mass that made him feeling like he was choking. He coughed, sputtering, until the object flew out of his mouth and landed on the linoleum with a slick smack, revealing itself to be some sort of spotted slug. He grimaced as it slithered across the floor, dragging a trail of brown goo behind it. What was that thing? The realization that it had been in Will's stomach was enough to make him want to vomit again but he held back, instead quickly reaching into a drawer in the counter and producing a knife. He crept after the slug and came down hard on its body with the paring knife in his hand, eliciting an unnerving squeal from the creature as it convulsed and eventually stilled.

For weeks after that, the encounters with the Upside Down and the vomiting of slugs occurred here and there, always alarming Will but he didn't want to worry anyone. He'd always taken care of himself and for as much as his family struggled with regular things like money problems and his parents fighting, he always tried to stay under the radar. This was usually easy enough because he'd always been a quiet, well-behaved kid who tried to stay out of other people's way for the most part. Disappearing into the Upside Down had all but completely drained his mother and brother mentally, emotionally, and physically. Just as they were finally beginning to return to normal, he didn't want to put them through that stress again. Besides, these were probably just residual effects. He coughed up tons of slime in the hospital - this had to be a similar side effect. And seeing the Upside Down? Had to be his imagination. Those encounters happened so quickly it was like blinking and imagining a memory. There was no reason to worry his family over something like that. Everything was fine.

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The suit was familiar but somehow more uncomfortable than he remembered. The large, gaping hole in front of him oozed and he could faintly see the other side through the pink membrane covering the opening. His arm was heavy with the weight of the suit as he lifted his hand to touch the darker membranes criss-crossing over the hole. Large vines wrapped around the room and if he stared long enough, it almost seemed like the membranes before him were breathing.

Two scientists flanked him, also wearing the protective suits that limited peripheral vision and would induce a panic attack in anyone remotely claustrophobic.

He wondered what those kids had actually been doing out in the woods by the lab's fence. They were far enough away to plausibly be innocent but he knew these kids. He knew they missed their friend and unlike most people in this town, they knew about what had *actually* happened to Will.

No one was supposed to know about what happened last month, nor were they supposed to know that the lab had had any involvement in Will's disappearance or return home. Only those who'd been directly involved knew the truth.

That was exactly why he was suspicious.

If he was right, they probably wanted to find their friend. How they intended to do that, he wasn't sure, but he knew that the wrong misstep could cost them big time.

Besides, he was already on the case. His gut had told him Eleven was still around somewhere in the Upside Down and overhearing the researchers at the lab had only solidified his suspicion. Now the only issue was finding Eleven and keeping her discovery from the other lab employees.

"Ready?" One of the researchers at his side asked, their voice sounding mechanical through the radio in their helmet.

Hopper stepped forward, pushing aside the sticky membranes that cover the entrance. “Let’s go,” he said as he moved forward, slipping through the opening and into the Upside Down.

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Video 011-21

The footage on the camera is dark, filmed in night-vision and showing a small room with one door and blank walls. Nothing moves for several minutes but warbled screaming can be heard in the distance. The heavy metal door opens suddenly and a man dressed in white pants and a white shirt appears in the doorway. There is a small girl at his side, writhing against his grip on her wrist. Her head is shaved with only the slightest hint of dark hair at her scalp and she’s wearing nothing but a hospital gown. She’s screaming and crying as she tries desperately to peel herself away from him.

“Papa!” she screams down the hallway.

Another guard appears, forcefully turning her around as the other guard shoves her into the room. She falls to the floor hard, scrambling to get back up as the metal door slams shut, coating the room in darkness once again.

“Papa!” she screams again, her voice breaking as she beats her hands against the door, too short to see through the small window at the top of the door. “No!” she yells and her voice is gnarled, broken.

She beats against the four walls of her enclosure until one of her hands starts to bleed and she succumbs to her cries. Leaning against the wall, she sobs, her shoulders shaking with every breath in the darkness.

“Papa...” she whimpers more plaintively as her head rests against the metal wall. She pulls her knees to her chest, rocking back and forth as she buries her face in her lap. Her cries are muffled and in the grainy footage she begins to blend in with the splotches of grey, white, and black in the video.

She sits like this for three hours, finally falling asleep on the floor, her legs pulled close to her as her head rests on the tiles. She slips her legs into her hospital gown, shivering as she drifts off into a restless sleep before the video cuts.

6. Ain't No Sunshine

Notes for the Chapter:

[A/N: Sorry I'm so behind! Life got a little busier but I'll try my best to update as quickly as possible! Let me know if you're still enjoying the fic with a comment and/or a kudos! Thanks!]

By late evening the Wheeler house had filled with dozens of friends and neighbors eager to celebrate the coming of the new year. Will had rested on the couch in the basement for most of the afternoon, his friends patiently reading comic books and hanging out all the while. Mike balanced his concern for his friend with the antsy anxiousness he felt to find Eleven. All he really knew, or at least that he thought he knew, was that El was alive in the Upside Down and that bad men were after her again. He hated the thought of her being alone and scared and it reminded him of how they'd found her on that rainy night last month. He still couldn't believe that he could grow so close to someone so quickly but something about her had been magnetic. She fascinated him and as they'd spent more time together, his infatuation had only grown.

From the basement they could hear the increasing sounds of more voices as party guests arrived. Mike's mom loved hosting events like this and often over-baked but there was no chance of anyone leaving the Wheeler home hungry.

"Mike!" His mom had called down the basement around 8 pm. Will was fast asleep on the couch and Dustin and Lucas were trying to have a quiet argument about who would win in a fight between The Justice League and The Avengers. *"Come say hi to your Uncle Percy and Aunt Sue!"*

"Be right back, guys." Mike sighed, setting his comic book down on the D&D table and taking the stairs two at a time. He would have much rather been out searching for Eleven but he was quite limited at the moment. Even if Will was awake and feeling better, it was getting later and the winds had already picked up, indicating the

storm was rolling in. There was no way his mom would let him go back out at this point.

In search of his mom, Mike weaved his way through groups of chatting adults, eventually finding her in the foyer with his aunt and uncle. Uncle Percy was his dad's older brother and always called him "Sport". Aunt Sue smelled strongly of French perfume and insisted on pinching his cheeks, telling him how "handsome" he was becoming every time she saw him. Mike sidled up between his mom and uncle, strategically out of his aunt's reach.

He smiled politely as his uncle peppered him with questions about the science fair and his aunt gushed over how tall he'd gotten since Easter earlier that year. Looking around, Mike took note of the individuals who were there. Most of them were old friends of his parents and his dad's coworkers. He recognized a few neighbors, including Lucas and Dustin's parents. With everything going on with Will and Eleven, Mike had completely forgotten about this party and apparently, so had Lucas and Dustin. Scanning the room, Mike noticed Nancy sitting on the sofa, tucked into the crook of Steve's arm as they watched the TV coverage of Times Square, though the ball wouldn't be dropping for another few hours. After everything that had happened back in November, it was surprising to see his sister still dating Steve Harrington. Considering the horrors they had experienced that week, they'd developed a newfound appreciation and respect for one another but there were some things about Nancy he probably just would never understand.

When he was finally able to peel himself away from awkward family chit-chat, Mike retreated back to the kitchen to find Lucas and Dustin flocked to the appetizers and desserts, each carrying a plate piled high with sweet and savory treats. The counters were covered with trays and dishes of varying shapes and sizes and the options ranged from mini quiches to assorted fruit tarts to brownies and everything in between.

"What are you guys doing?" Mike asked, crossing the threshold into the kitchen.

"Uh, isn't it obvious?" Lucas responded sarcastically as he balanced a

third apple tart on his already teetering plate.

Dustin stuffed a mini pig-in-a-blanket into his mouth before loading his plate with three more. "We're staying up late, we're at a party, and we're taking care of our friend who *just so happens* to be tight-rope walking across dimensions," he said, one cheek stuffed with food, then swallowed. "*We need sustenance!*"

Mike sighed, rolling his eyes good-naturedly before grabbing a paper plate and loading up on his own stash of goodies.

"Hey, Will's up!" Lucas said as the boys carefully made their way downstairs, balancing cups of soda in the crooks of their arms and loaded plates in their hands.

"Hey guys," Will smiled, sitting up with one arm supporting his weight, as the three other boys all stepped down into the basement. Dustin carefully set the two plates he was carrying down on the table.

"Do you want anything to eat?" Mike asked as he pushed a comic book aside to make room on the table for the plate and drinks he was carrying. He tucked the book and a few D&D character pieces under the table so that Lucas could add his own plates to the assortment.

"Sure," Will said, tossing the throw blanket off of his legs and moving to sit at the table. "I'm sorry I kind of messed up our plans today, Mike."

Mike smiled despite himself. He didn't want Will to feel bad for being sick - it wasn't his fault, after all. "Don't worry about it," he assured his friend as he popped a bacon-wrapped cheese ball into his mouth. "Besides, tomorrow is New Year's Day and everything will be closed so we can just try first thing in the morning."

Lucas paused, an apple tart en route to his mouth as he looked dubiously at Mike, "You are not seriously suggesting what I think you are..."

Mike shrugged, "Everything closes on New Years, including government," He picked up another cheese ball from the plate in the

middle of the table. "Tomorrow's our best chance."

"-At breaking into a federal facility." Dustin added, disconcerted.

"Do you guys have a better suggestion?" Mike challenged, looking around the table at his friends. "If we're right, El has been stuck in the Upside Down for more than a *month* now. She literally saved us from *being killed!*" His voice rose and fell dramatically as he gestured animatedly. No one said anything - he *did* have a point after all. "*Multiple times!* We can't just leave her in there,"

"Okay," Lucas said, putting his hands up as though to slow the progression of Mike's developing monologue. "But even if the portal is still open, and it *is* in the lab, how are we supposed to get *inside?*"

"We'll figure it out," Mike answered vaguely and his friends' faces fell in dismay. "The *point* is that she's a part of the party and no one gets left behind, *right?*"

Dustin and Lucas exchanged glances before nodding. "Right."

"Okay," Mike said, seemingly satisfied with his friends' response. "So we'll leave tomorrow morning and head to the lab. If El found a way out before, we should be able to find a way *in.*"

His friends nodded their agreement. Will was mostly quiet during this exchange. He hadn't had the chance to get to know El personally but he vaguely remembered her voice speaking to him when he was in the Upside Down. He was aware of the fact that she had played a huge role in his rescue and he'd heard all of the stories of how she'd saved Mike and Dustin from Troy and James, how she'd flipped the government agents' van when they were being chased down, and how she'd put herself in danger to stop the Monster from killing them all. Even though he didn't really *know* her, he really wanted to so he was just as dedicated to finding her as the rest of his friends. Though, maybe not *as much* as Mike.

As time passed, the boys decided to continue their current D&D campaign until midnight. They hadn't played in a couple of days so they were more than happy to escape back into the facade of

normalcy. Mike hoped the game would serve as a distraction, his anxiety at the thought of what El could be going through at any given moment felt like a monster breathing down his neck.

“A beholder appears from the depths of the dark, dripping cave! His central eye glares at you menacingly as his eye stalks prepare their attack!” Mike narrated, finally relaxing enough to get into the game. “Will, your action!”

“Fireball the son of a bitch!” Lucas exclaimed loudly as Will hesitated, cradling the die in his hands.

“Cast --” Dustin began but Mike slammed his hands on the table.

“The beholder takes no pity on your puny human hesitation!” Mike screamed. “His eye stalks turn to you, ready --”

“Uh, cast mirror image!” Will exclaimed hurriedly as he tossed the die onto the table, the boys watching it spin eagerly before it finally came to rest.

“It worked!” Lucas exclaimed brightly. “He rolled an 11!”

Dustin darted a glance Mike whose face had visibly faltered slightly.

“Yeah, that’s not awkward...” Dustin commented sarcastically.

“What?” Mike startled as though coming out of a deep train of thought. “N-no, it’s fine,” He shook off their concerned looks, insisting on continuing. “The beholder’s death ray destroys the duplicate and you’re able to make it out of the cave safely,” he said, his voice a little less animated, a little more distant than it’d once been.

The boys continued their game, unaware of the time that had passed until Nancy’s voice echoed down the basement staircase.

“Mike, the ball’s about to drop!”

Mike looked at his watch. It was 11:55.

“Okay, we’ll be up in a sec!” He called out as his friends stood up from the table.

Dustin walked over to the back door and peeked through the curtain on the window. “Dude, it’s snowing like crazy out there!”

“Let me see!” Will said, eagerly rushing to the window. The landscape outside was already blanketed with a thick layer of snow as heavy snowflakes blew through swaying trees on rough gusts of wind. “Wow, I wonder how much we’re gonna get,”

“I think my mom said it’s supposed to snow until the middle of the night,” Lucas said as the boys headed upstairs. “So probably like, ten inches or something like that,”

“No way,” Mike disagreed as the four boys made their way into the living room where much of the party had congregated. He noticed that the party had thinned out in attendance, probably due to the storm and people deciding to go home early. Dustin and Lucas went over to their parents to check in as Will and Mike stood by the doorway. Will’s mom was working a late night shift and Jonathan had said earlier that week that he thought it’d be “too awkward” to go to the party with Nancy and Steve being there. Fighting off a faceless monster was no problem but apparently all three of them attending a social function together was just too much to ask.

As everyone eagerly watched the TV, a ticker in the corner counting down the minutes until midnight, Mike’s mind wandered to thoughts of El. What if she wasn’t in the Upside Down but she was actually out in the storm? Would she be okay? Maybe he could get out of the house and look for her tonight. No, there was no way. Everyone would be up late, his mom most of all, and it’d be obvious if he and his friends disappeared tonight. Besides, he could already feel the heaviness of sleep settling on him as he fought to keep sharp. Caught between anxious worry and helpless exhaustion, he could do nothing but hope for tomorrow to be successful. He tried to think more positively. He imagined finding El and bringing her home. She could live with them and go to school with them. He’d show her all the things he never got to during the week she was here. Star Wars and

the arcade and with all the snow they were getting, he could teach her to make a snowman. He could imagine her standing beside him amidst the crowd of partygoers, her small smile making his heart swell. And when the clock struck midnight, maybe he would give her a New Year's kiss but probably not because literally everyone would see and that would be completely embarrassing.

Mike was finally pulled from his thoughts as the people around him began to shout.

"Five!"

"Four!"

"Three!"

"Two!"

"One!"

"Happy New Year!"

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Trudging through the dark and dismal landscape, Hopper's mind whirled with questions and potentials. How could he find El on his own? What would he do if and when he found her?

The researchers escorting him through the Upside Down were harmless enough. One was a seasoned biologist from the NIH named Linda and the other, a recent graduate from Hopkins named Kevin. Neither had been connected to the events that transpired last month but that didn't make him trust them.

The trio moved through the alternate version of their town, stepping over vines in their clunky protective gear and stopping periodically as Kevin and Linda collected samples of the decaying foliage. Not even twenty minutes into their venture and they'd already managed to secure several vials and plastic bags of the mysterious brown slime, pieces of vines, and a few other strange plant-like specimens.

Hopper looked around, his flashlight illuminating only a small area in front of them due to the thick fog. White particles floated by the screen of his helmet and he remembered that it was supposed to snow tonight. Getting home would be a bitch.

“What is this?” Kevin asked, stepping toward a large, yellow, egg-like structure.

“Fascinating,” Linda breathed as she pulled another plastic bag out of the satchel around her waist, carving out a piece of the structure to be tested back at the lab. “We’ll find out, won’t we?”

Hopper largely remained quiet. He wasn’t a scientist and didn’t pretend to be one. The only reason he knew that he was even picked to go on these excursions was because of his previous success in exploring them and the fact that he owed a debt. He’d discussed the terms with some of the lab’s big wigs last month and they’d reached the agreement that he would assist with their study of the Upside Down, and help them find “the girl”.

Most of the top employees of the lab had died in the middle school back in November but several remained. Many of the lower-level researchers had transferred, not wanting to be connected to such a scandal, a few of the higher-ranked agents and researchers had stayed on to manage damage control and protect the lab’s image, and the rest of the staff had been replaced by eager, oblivious newbies who wanted a shot at working at the distinguished Hawkins National Laboratory. Without Dr. Brenner, the lab was being run by some of the top agents who knew about Eleven’s existence and the deal Hopper had made. They’d swooped in to provide a cover story for the massacre in the middle school - something about an undercover operation and being ambushed by an unknown group of assailants, possibly ‘commies’. The whole story had sounded ridiculous but the papers ate it up and with the re-emergence of Will Byers, the lab’s plight had largely lost the spotlight. Everyone had wanted to know about the “boy who came back to life”. Even that had had to be explained away and the lab’s top guys were on that, too, with Hopper involved to add credibility. Something about a mix-up in the identification process. Someone who “looked like Will had been discovered and was mistaken for the missing Byers boy”. That was

certainly one way of putting it.

He'd even had to lie to Joyce and the boys about the portal. While he couldn't make a public statement for obvious reasons, his supervisors had demanded that he tell everyone who had been previously involved that the portal had closed following the events of last month. It was easy enough to make up a story. At the time, everyone had been caught up in the fact that Eleven had apparently disappeared with the monster when she killed it. Convincing them to believe that in doing so, the portal in the lab had closed, didn't seem like a stretch. That would allow the lab the privacy to continue their research into the mysterious dimension while also protecting everyone who'd known about its existence from the government wanting to permanently silence them.

Hopper looked around, marveling at the strange yet disconcerting environment he found himself in. Everything looked like home but was starkly different and that was more than a little unsettling. Still, he moved forward. He'd seen enough in his time as a cop to put up a barrier between himself and the things he witnessed. He didn't care too much about exploring this place but when it came to the girl - Eleven - he couldn't live with the idea of turning her over to the government again. He'd made that decision once before and the guilt had wracked him day and night ever since. If given the chance to save her or sell her out once again, he knew what he would do.

That's why he kept an eye out for any signs that she might have passed by. He suspected she had been taking the food out of the dropbox in the woods so he kept his eyes peeled for used plastic wrap, a Tupperware lid - anything that could alert him to her presence. Still, they were far enough away from the woods that he wasn't surprised to not find any remains of the food he'd left. If he was going to search for her, he had to go further into the Upside Down and he would have to do it alone.

"There are a lot of these things," Kevin commented as they passed by yet another egg-like structure. They were large, almost reaching Hopper's hip in height.

Linda reached for her satchel, retrieving another specimen bag. "This

is my last one,” she said as she cut a piece of the yellow mass and secured it in the bag. “We should be getting back to the lab soon anyway.”

As Hopper watched these two scientists gush over the “incredible” and “fascinating” biological formations before them, he couldn’t help but think of his daughter, Sarah. The ironic thing was that she used to love science and would have probably gotten a kick out of being on an exploration like this - not that he would have ever allowed it. Still, it seemed strange that he would be the one plodding through this mysterious land.

As the three of them reached the portal that would lead them back into the lab, Hopper stole one last look back into the darkness. If she really was out there, he had to get back here as soon as possible, without the government science lackeys around to screw anything up or sell him out. He couldn’t let them find her first. He knew what they would do if they did.